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Council moves toward a smaller Science City

Gaithersburg West renamed ‘Great Seneca Science Corridor'

by Margie Hyslop | Staff writer

The County Council has agreed in principle on staging and scaling back potential development for a science-oriented jobs center west of Interstate 270 between Rockville and Gaithersburg.

In an 8-1 straw vote Tuesday, the council supported revisions to a draft plan that has been debated for years. Council member Marc Elrich (D-At large) cast the dissenting vote. The council may take a final vote next month.

At the urging of Gaithersburg Mayor Sidney A. Katz, the council also agreed to rename the draft the Great Seneca Science Corridor Plan, removing the city's name from what had been called the Gaithersburg West Master Plan. The plan covers 4,360 acres and incorporates the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

The plan initially called for expanding the 6.9 million-square-foot Shady Grove Life Sciences Center into a denser 20 million-square-foot Science City that includes housing and retail.

In Tuesday's vote, at the suggestion of Council member Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, the council informally agreed to cap commercial development at 17.5 million square feet.

Knapp's proposal countered a recommendation from Elrich that development be capped at 15.5 million square feet. Residents concerned about traffic and preserving green space have pushed for reductions in the plan's scope.

Johns Hopkins has pressed to expand development on the 107-acre Belward Farm beyond what residents and some Council members have been comfortable with. Hopkins purchased the farm 1989 under an agreement that development be limited to agricultural, academic, medical care and research or related uses.

The science center, which already includes the Universities at Shady Grove and a campus of Johns Hopkins University, could be served by three stops on the proposed Corridor

Cities Transitway, a 14.1-mile mass transit line that would connect Shady Grove and Clarksburg.

But Elrich and Council member Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg have said they fear that traffic delays would become intolerable if denser development is allowed.

Andrews said that while the bioscience center is important and desirable, he worries that by 2030, average vehicle speeds are likely to slow to 9 mph in surrounding neighborhoods during rush hour.

As a result of Tuesday's straw vote, council members informally agreed with Andrews' efforts to reduce congestion below what is allowed in similarly zoned areas in the county. Andrews also wants to include provisions to protect views of farm buildings and preserve seven to 12 acres of open land.

The vote also indicated the council would require that half of the CCT be built before the second half of the plan could be built.

"Everyone ought to be pleased we are opening the way to the high-tech, high-wage economy we know we need," Council member George Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said.

Elrich, also of Takoma Park, said he remains concerned that the plan would allow development of a general office park because it does not set requirements for how much work would be scientific.

The county's economic development director, Steven Silverman, has estimated that at least 30 percent of jobs would be science-related, but that estimate includes administrative and support services.

An analysis prepared for County Executive Isiah Leggett projects that expanding the Shady Grove Life Sciences Center under the proposed plan would bring the county about $3.29 billion in net revenue over 40 years.

The projections also estimate that 40,000 more workers would be added to the 20,000 now working in the science center plan area, bordered on the east by Shady Grove Road.